

THE BELTWAY IS NOT A PLACE FOR USER-FRIENDLINESS

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"We Will Never Be Rid of Google" (*The New York Times*, September 30) is quite a headline for the same Julia Angwin who wrote the book on MySpace.

Angwin's comprehensive unofficial account was published in 2009 as *Stealing MySpace: The Battle to Control the Most Popular Website in America* (not "We Will Never Be Rid of MySpace"). Its subtitle didn't remain current for long: Facebook's international reach already made the "in America" qualifier requisite for the other social network by 2008. Still, the snapshot of the then-hip site, not yet a punchline in a David Pogue *Times* column exemplifying when "a hot property becomes a lame has-been" (alongside action star Steven Seagal, well after his career transition from *Hard to Kill* to direct-to-video, and the Macarena dance craze), remains an instructive case study.

In Angwin's own words, the juggernaut "now positioned to further entrench its dominance of our information landscape" due to lack of antitrust enforcement was a parenthetical in the post-Y2K cyberspace from which MySpace emerged: "In early 2003 the dot-com boom was over, and the next Internet boom had not yet begun. During this in-between period, only the big three companies — AOL, MSN, and Yahoo ([MySpace cofounder Chris] DeWolfe called them 'the untouchable triumvirate') — were thriving

(Google had not yet taken off.)" The first of the troika disconnected its formerly ubiquitous dial-up service on the same day that "We Will Never Be Rid of Google" saw fit to see print.

While Angwin asserts that "Google has an unassailable lead in collecting and analyzing data from across the web" in 2025, in 2009 she had noted that by 2003, "even high school students could build expert-looking webpages;" upstarts like MySpace no longer "required massive computer resources and huge teams of computer programmers" as they had when Google and Yahoo were founded in the 1990s. Individual web designers unaffiliated with Google have made such improvements to its core services as $\&udm=14$, which automatically filters out AI from Google web searches, and Filmot for finding phrases in video subtitles on Google-owned YouTube.

Angwin's desired future of "competing search engines that offer different experiences" independently of Google already exists, albeit unevenly distributed in the remaining 10% of total search traffic, from generalists such as DuckDuckGo whose crawlers span the publicly accessible World Wide Web, to the hyper-specific likes of "The Geocities Animated Gif Search."

To be sure, their names are harder to remember, even when typable just as quickly, but Google's originated as a pun on a previously obscure math term for a quantity so ludicrously gigantic as to defy any conceivable practical use. So did that of their Googleplex headquarters; but is the relevant quantity not a googol or even a googolplex, so much as the trillions spent by the Pentagon?

Angwin highlights the tech maverick's "small but growing defense contracts" — an example of how "despite its power in the marketplace, Google is still vulnerable to all kinds of pressure campaigns from the government." Yet apparently it simultaneously possesses "unfettered market power" — a contradiction untangled by libertarian activist Karl Hess in a 1970 *New York Times Magazine* profile: "We have the illusion of freedom only because so few ever try to exercise it. Try it sometime. ... We have all the freedom of a balloon floating in a pin factory."

Angwin's feared "possible future in which the administration starts pressuring Google to shape search results in its favor" was already the present reality during the four years of the Biden administration (and even Trump's first four years). As Jenin Younes explained in "How Biden Enabled Trump's Censorship" (*Compact*, March 19): "the lesson of the past five years is clear: Civil-liberties violations that you countenance will be turned against you sooner than you expect. That is why we need a renewed commitment to civil liberties from both the left and the right, not the sort we have seen in which each side uses the concept as a cudgel when convenient."

Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow made a frequently paraphrased observation that "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." You should be less so inclined when you don't have the hammer — especially when it's about to be used on you.

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